

**Abigail Adams and the Doomed Rhetoric of  
Revolutionary Era Women**

By

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## **Abigail Adams and the Doomed Rhetoric of Revolutionary Era Women**

Abigail Adams wrote an extraordinary request in a letter to her husband on March 31, 1776, saying "...in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors..."<sup>1</sup> Because women were routinely excluded from the political process, an admonition, by a woman, declaring that ladies should be remembered in the new government was remarkable. This is significant for the study of historical public address because the record of the discourse of women from the American Revolution is scant; certainly, a robust public record of women's interest in obtaining new liberties does not exist. Abigail Adams' unique circumstances allowed her not only to write, but also to be remembered for her writing during a time when gender roles and societal norms rigidly constrained the rhetoric of women.

Several key factors differentiated Adams from other women. Although she did not receive a formal education as a child, Adams learned to read and write. Her father encouraged her to read from his extensive library, and Adams educated herself by studying the works of Shakespeare, John Milton, and Alexander Pope.<sup>2</sup> This alone sets her apart from other women since many women during the Revolutionary period could not read. Additionally, even of the women who could read, only a minority of women could write.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abigail Adams. "'Remember the Ladies' Abigail and John Adams Exchange Views, 1776." *The Way We Lived*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Milton Company, 2004: pg 130.

<sup>2</sup> "The Decisive Day is Come: The Battle of Bunker Hill. Abigail Adams 1744-1818." *The Massachusetts Historical Society*. 12 October 2004. <http://www.masshist.org/bh/aadamsmio.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Warner. *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990: pg 14.

Adams' literacy is especially significant since women were not supposed to speak in the public sphere. Historian Linda Kerber noted: "Americans had inherited their political vocabulary from Aristotle, who believed the good life could be realized only in the context of the public sector, a strictly male arena."<sup>4</sup> In the 1770's women were not allowed to make public speeches. If Adams had not been literate, it would have been almost impossible for her to be remembered for her political discourse. Writing was her only avenue to make her voice heard.

However, writing could also be problematic. Revolutionary society viewed the act of writing as a masculine pursuit,<sup>5</sup> and writing for publication was generally excluded from women.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Adams could not write a political statement for public consumption. Fortunately, letter writing was deemed acceptable for women since letters are produced for private correspondence.<sup>7</sup> Circumstances also enabled her to write her letters: America was at war and spouses had to write to communicate with each other. The fact that John Adams was away from his wife serving his country freed Adams from the conventional belief that writing was for males.

Knowledge was another factor that advantaged her over other women, particularly on the subject of politics. Adams became an avid reader of political science when her husband introduced the subject to her.<sup>8</sup> Adams' husband respected her intelligence and wit. This is significant because according to Kerber, a "distrust of the female capacity to

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Kerber. *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1980: pg 7.

<sup>5</sup> Warner. pg 15.

<sup>6</sup> Edith Gelles. *First Thoughts: Life and Letters of Abigail Adams*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998: pg 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* pg 20.

take politics seriously”<sup>9</sup> pervaded revolutionary society. Adams conversed frequently with her husband about political subjects. In these discussions, Adams offered her own opinions, although she presented them in a deferential manner.<sup>10</sup> By the time she wrote her request to her husband, she was at ease with discussing politics, and her husband had already demonstrated that he saw her as an intelligent person. This advantaged Adams over other women because she had more knowledge about politics than most women, and she had a receptive audience.

Adams had another advantage over the average woman; she had political access. Her marriage to John Adams closely connected her to the Revolution’s inner circle. When she sat down to write her request, she knew that her husband was on the committee that would draft the Declaration of Independence;<sup>11</sup> she knew that he could potentially make the new government more generous to women. This privileged her over other women. If the average woman even knew to whom she should write, it would be seen as extremely presumptuous for her to write the founding fathers with a request. Adams, on the other hand, could write her request because of her relationship to John Adams.

However, Adams’ rhetoric was still constrained by societal norms and gender roles. When Adams wrote her letters to her husband, they were not intended for public consumption. Years later when asked about publishing her letters, she exclaimed: “No... Heedless and inaccurate as I am, I have too much vanity to risk my reputation before the

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<sup>9</sup> Kerber. pg 35.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Akers. *Abigail Adams: An American Woman*. Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980: pg 32, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Gelles. *First Thoughts*. pg 14.

public.”<sup>12</sup> Taking this into account, it would appear that the only audience Adams considered when making her request was an audience of one: her husband.

Even though Adams knew her husband would most likely listen to her, she still had to be immensely careful in how she chose to word her letter. Historian Elaine Crane emphasized:

Even though she recognized the correlation between contemporary politics and gender, her willingness to engage in theoretical debate was tempered by the radical nature of subject and the boundaries of permissible female behavior. John Adams, no less than Abigail, had internalized the codes governing female conduct, making outright advocacy of women’s rights all but impossible—unless Abigail was willing to alienate John or humiliate herself.<sup>13</sup>

Abigail Adams was a devoted and loving wife to John Adams, which meant that neither of these two options—alienating John or humiliating her—was suitable. Adams needed to find a way to express her views without losing the affection and esteem of her husband.<sup>14</sup> These constraints meant that Adams’ request, though revolutionary for the time, was not as personal or as radical as it could have been. She wrote:

I long to hear that you have declared an independency—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of Husbands.<sup>15</sup>

Adams began by making her request personal: “I desire you would remember the ladies.” Then she addressed what she wanted done in a more impersonal form. She did not write for herself in that she did not say, “I want a vote” or “I would like these particular British laws eradicated.” She created discursive space for herself by speaking for others. While doing this, she was very specific about who she was representing. The

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<sup>12</sup> Edith Gelles. “The Abigail Industry.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*. October 1988: pg 656.

<sup>13</sup> Elaine Forman Crane. “Political Dialogue and the Spring of Abigail’s Discontent.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*. October 1999: pg 745.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Abigail Adams. pg 130.

use of the word “ladies” is telling. If Adams had meant that she wanted a more generous government for all females, she easily could have written “Remember the females” or “Remember the women.” Instead, she spoke of ladies, a term in eighteenth-century America that had class implications. Ladies were well-bred, well-mannered, and well-married women. Adams did not say the country maid or the illiterate wife of a day laborer should be remembered. She spoke for the ladies.

While this was still a progressive thought, Adams would have found her position much more difficult to defend had she advocated on behalf of all women receiving new rights. This is because the founding fathers did not tend to be generous towards anyone. Many revolutionary leaders believed in slavery, property qualifications for male suffrage, and the preeminence of those with wealth. Adams’ choice of the word ladies suggests that she wanted to appeal to her husband’s favor for the upper class.<sup>16</sup>

Adams continued her letter by remaining impersonal when explaining how she wanted ladies remembered. She wrote: “Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could.”<sup>17</sup> She did not write, “I do not want you to have unlimited power.” She enlarged her subject to “all men,” specifically “husbands.” While John Adams was included in this category, he was not the sole member of her subject. In this way, her letter did not take on a personally accusatory tone, although it made a general denouncement of the way men behaved.

Likely knowing that this assertion may be looked upon unkindly, Adams included evidence for why she boldly stated that husbands should not have sole power. She wrote:

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<sup>16</sup> John Hollitz and A. James Fuller. *Contending Voices*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003: pg 67.

<sup>17</sup> Abigail Adams. pg 130.

Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.<sup>18</sup>

Undoubtedly, she had heard her husband make the same kind of justification for a break from the British government. What Adams attempted to do was to align the ladies' cause with the same arguments that explained the men's decision to rebel from Great Britain. She also raised the uncomfortable issue of hypocrisy should the Revolutionaries choose not to allow women more representation in the new American government. Revolutionaries rallied around slogans such as "No taxation without representation" and "Live free or die." Through her allusions to these ideas of tyranny and rebellion, Adams equated the cause of ladies with the American cause of freedom.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity.<sup>19</sup>

In this part of her letter, Adams continued to describe in oblique terms what she wanted for the ladies. Historians disagree on the extent of her request, but most agree that, at the very least, she wanted the laws of *femme covert* eased. According to noted legal scholar William Blackstone, as quoted by Joan Gunderson and Gwen Gampel, *femme covert* should be interpreted as "the husband and wife are one and that one is the husband."<sup>20</sup> Adams did not want wives to remain powerless as evidenced by her statements: "Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands" and "Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Joan R. Gunderson and Gwen Victor Gampel. "Married Women's Legal Status in Eighteenth-Century New York and Virginia." *The William and Mary Quarterly*. January 1982: pg 114.

indignity with impunity,” as well as her reference to a husband becoming a “friend” and not a “master.” Exactly what she wanted done about this is subject to interpretation, although a weakening of the unlimited power of husbands seems to be most consistent with what she wrote.<sup>21</sup>

While she was imprecise in articulating what she desired, the response she received from John Adams unequivocally denied her request. As a male, John Adams faced a different set of constraints when writing his response. It is probable that John Adams was keenly aware that his letter might be made public. Only a year earlier, the British intercepted one of his letters, and they published it.<sup>22</sup> British subjects laughed heartily when they read that Adams had written to his wife about an officer, saying: “You must love his dogs if you love him.”<sup>23</sup> The threat of publication would have constrained his speech more than his wife’s because she had no reasonable expectation of publication. John Adams also knew that granting ladies additional rights was not politically expedient.<sup>24</sup> It would have been unwise for his political career for him to agree with his wife.

John Adams’ reaction to his wife’s letter was dismissive. In his response, he compared women to other powerless groups. He wrote:

As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where [Sic]. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges [Sic] were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull [Sic] than all the rest were grown

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<sup>21</sup> Akers. pg 43-45.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* pg 37, 38.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Gelles. *First Thoughts.* pg 17.

discontented.—This is rather to coarse a compliment but you are so saucy, I won't blot it out.<sup>25</sup>

John Adams equated Abigail Adams' wish for a more generous government for women with children, apprentices, and Negroes disobeying their masters. These analogies demonstrate clearly that John Adams saw women's place in society as in subjection to their husbands. Husbands were masters.

In addition to saying women should be in subjection, John Adams also called females a tribe. Wendy Martin, an editor of *Women's Studies*, elaborated on his use of the word tribe. She wrote:

To a certain extent, Adams' insistence on patriarchal dominance is based on a fear of chaos; the use of the word 'tribe' suggests that he views women and other politically powerless people as 'wild,' and in need of taming if social order is to be maintained.<sup>26</sup>

In Revolutionary America, the word tribe would have been associated with the Native Americans. The Native Americans were typically seen as savage and inferior. Thus, when John Adams called women a tribe, he alluded to the belief that women are savage—their ways were not equipped for the man's world of political decision-making just as Native Americans' lifestyles were incongruent with European-American ways of living.

After stating his reasoning for why ladies should not receive anything new, he then wrote his planned course of action. He wrote:

Depend on it, We [males] know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho [Sic] they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and

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<sup>25</sup> John Adams. "'Remember the Ladies' Abigail and John Adams Exchange Views, 1776." *The Way We Lived*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Milton Company, 2004: pg 131.

<sup>26</sup> Wendy Martin. "Editorial: Correspondence of John and Abigail Adams—Considerations for the Bicentennial." *Women's Studies*. 1975: pg 1.

softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters.<sup>27</sup>

This part of his response directly addressed her claims about power, tyranny, and representation. He explained that women actually do have power. He noted: “In practice you know we are subjects.” While he admitted that men have power in theory, he dismissed her claim that men have absolute power by saying that women in fact are the ones with the most power. This argument is internally contradictory. He wrote that men are subjects while simultaneously denying his wife’s request for power. If he were truly subject, he would have had to do what his wife said. However, this is a typical form of rhetoric of those who want to remain in power—claim that the opposing side already has what they want. By saying that women already have power, John Adams was able to circumvent her indirect accusation of hypocrisy.

Abigail Adams’ letter and her husband’s reactions to it have implications for the study of historical public address. First, while these letters are public knowledge now, they were not published until 1818. If Abigail Adams, an intelligent and eloquent woman, could not purpose to publish her political thoughts, this suggests that females were severely limited in their ability to produce works for public consumption. Indeed, even with all the enabling factors that allowed Adams to write, the primary reason Adams’ words are remembered is because of the circumstances of the Revolution. If Adams’ husband had been in Braintree, Massachusetts with his wife, instead of in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she would have had no excuse to write her political thoughts. If Adams’ husband had not gained fame through his leadership during the Revolutionary War and his subsequent presidency, there is little chance that her letters would have been

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<sup>27</sup> John Adams. pg 131.

published at all. Women were seen as implicitly tied to their husbands<sup>28</sup>—if John Adams had not been successful, then Adams would not have had the connections or notoriety to publish her own work.<sup>29</sup>

This means that the average woman's chance of being remembered for her rhetoric is negligible. Most women were illiterate, lacking knowledge, or lacking political access: all things that the patriarchal society had no intention of granting women. Judging by John Adams' response to Abigail Adams' letter, there would have been little incentive for women to break societal norms and publish political statements. Circumstances could not have been better for Adams' private request; she delivered it eloquently, but to no avail. Since rhetoric often serves the purpose of persuading the audience, if women realized that an attempt at persuasion would be unsuccessful, why would they break the rigid societal norms of good behavior by speaking or writing? Kerber quotes Margaret Livingston, a young woman who lived during the Revolution, who seems to explain her gender's lack of public discourse: "You now that our Sex are *doomed* to be obedient in every stage of life so that *we* shant be great gainers in this contest."<sup>30</sup> To make a political statement would have been disobedient, and thus it was not allowed.

The rules of public address during the American Revolution excluded women from political discourse in the public sphere. Adams' letter demonstrates that even the brightest and most articulate females were denied a chance to enter the public debate during the Revolution. This is important for the study of historical public address because it shows that women did not have an equal chance to make their voices heard.

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<sup>28</sup> Akers. pg 37.

<sup>29</sup> Gelles. "The Abigail Industry." pg 657.

<sup>30</sup> Kerber. pg 35.

Adams' letter shows that if circumstances aligned perfectly, a woman might be able to write something that was later published; but for the average women, societal pressure and strict gender roles practically excluded their voices in totality.

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